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ABSTRACT

A review of several classroom observation and survey studies of comprehension instruction, content area reading for homework, and aspects of reading assignments raises the question of whether enough is being done in Irish schools to develop critical reading competency. It appears from these studies that many students are being left to their own devices when it comes to dealing with aspects of the assigned texts, other than vocabulary instruction, and even that aspect of direct assistance may be suspect. The studies show that students are frequently required to read texts with only the direction to read certain pages in order to answer questions the next day. Reasons for the assigned reading and suggestions on how students should go about their reading are not often explained. (RBW)

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Critical Reading - How Seriously do we take it?

Paper presented to the Ninth Annual Conference of the Reading Association of Ireland, Carysfort College of Education, September 1984.

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Introduction

To some in the audience the title of my paper may imply a slur upon reading teachers because it may be understood as suggesting that something important is not being taken seriously. I want to say at the outset that the title was not chosen with such an implication or suggestion in mind. Rather, it was chosen to raise questions about what can be described as 'critical reading' and to ask in particular what is it we are doing to develop critical competency and how effective that might be.

By 'critical reading' I mean the ability to respond to the message of a text by assessing and evaluating it in the light of a range of possible criteria which have been determined or accepted by the reader. To undertake such assessment and evaluation there are certain abilities which readers need to develop and demonstrate.

A reader needs to have an ability to distinguish the more significant points of a text from those of lesser significance, secondly an ability to identify and assess the logic and relationship of ideas in a text, and thirdly an ability to assess and evaluate the validity of the ideas and fifthly to assess the validity of conclusions which might be advanced. If these are the abilities which a critical reader demonstrates it follows that in our teaching we must somehow or other ensure their development.

It is because I have some evidence that this development is not being ensured to the extent that I believe it should that I have written this paper.

I have two sources for the evidence which leads me to this conviction. The first stems from my own direct experience as a teacher at secondary and tertiary level, the second from research, both of other researchers and my own.

As a teacher, particularly of third-level students, I am frequently surprised and at times appalled at the responses which some of my students make to reading assignments. They are, after all, students drawn, academically speaking, from a highly selected group who, prior to their university careers, have undergone an intense study experience in which reading has been a primary means for that study. I have not systematically researched their performances or probed the weaknesses that appal me beyond noting that many fail to respond to what they are asked, often from no lack of knowledge, and that many of their responses are incoherent as well as being unrelated to what they have been asked to read. However these observations do pose questions about the kind of reading strategies they are being taught to use and the extent to which these strategies develop critical approaches in their reading.

Critical Reading in the Classroom.

Having referred to personal reasons for raising questions about critical reading, I am now setting these reasons aside lest we become merely anecdotal about the matter and am turning to evidence provided by observational and survey studies conducted in classrooms and which bear upon the question I have raised. First I shall discuss evidence which is drawn from three studies of classroom practice and which can help answer questions about the extent to which attention is paid to the development of critical reading.

Durkin's Observational Studies (1979).

Durkin's study is one I have discussed at a previous RAI conference, Farren (1981). It is a seminal study and while Durkin didn't set out to directly answer questions about what might be included under the term 'critical reading' her findings do allow us to make clear inferences in this regard. Durkin's subjects were twenty-four teachers teaching 'reading' and social studies to 4th grade students in a number of Illinois schools.

Durkin sought to discover what kind of direct assistance students receive in order that they might understand what they read. Her findings indicate that very little positive assistance of any kind beyond help with word meanings was provided. Less than one per cent of the time of the twenty-four teachers observed was discovered to have been devoted to what Durkin termed 'comprehension instruction'.

Comprehension instruction is defined by Durkin as the teacher saying or doing "something to help children understand or work out the meaning of more than a single isolated word". In contrast to the absence of such instruction considerable time was observed being devoted by teachers to determining what knowledge of the texts had been retained. Such work occupied almost eighteen per cent of the time observed and the single largest activity in the teachers' use of their time. In the section of her study devoted to observing reading in social study classes no time was noted as being taken up by comprehension instruction. Yet here again a high proportion of time was allocated to determining knowledge, with, as the report notes, "the vast majority of questions focussing on facts, many of which were trivial, some of which are no longer facts".

These findings clearly allow us to infer that if very little of what Durkin calls comprehension instruction was being provided in the time observed and since other specified activities accounted for the rest of the time, the most significant being the determining of literal knowledge, then no evidence of any instruction in critical reading being developed is available from Durkin's study.

Lunzer and Gardner Studies

Lunzer and Gardner (1979) conducted a detailed investigation into reading in the classroom and reading for homework across several curriculum areas. Although they do not directly report on 'critical reading' as such two sections of their investigation allow clear inferences to be drawn as to what might or might have been done in this regard.

Their survey of reading in the classroom revealed that most of the sustained reading observed was student initiated and in the report is termed 'personal reading'. A second form of reading termed by Lunzer and Gardner as 'short-burst reading' was also observed taking place in the classroom. In the case of the former it was generally undertaken without any specific guidance or direction from the teachers. So if the students were reading their texts in a critical manner they were doing so quite spontaneously. In the case of 'short-burst' reading it was undertaken for the purpose of discovering facts, or checking on specific points made in the text and apart from the instructions designed to guide the readers' attention to these facts or points no guidance or reference to critical reading was reported.

Reading for homework was also surveyed by Lunzer and Gardner. Again, apart from setting tasks, the teachers surveyed did not usually discuss or give any guidance as to how these tasks might be undertaken. The inference to be drawn is that the teachers saw reading 'as reading, as reading, as reading'. Students were assumed to be able to read and

therefore to have mastered the necessary study skills which would include critical reading. No specific action was called for to develop these skills, or even to check that students were competent in them. In fact the question didn't arise.

It is impossible to say how general this alleged absence of guidance might be, but McGaie (1981) in a case study of reading in the context of the transition from primary to secondary school found, as he puts it, secondary school teachers to be "in the dark" as far as developing competence in study skills is concerned. The teachers, he reports, recognised the importance of the study skills concept, but did not seem to accept responsibility for developing competence in this area.

Farren's Survey.

The investigation, reported in full in Farren (1983), detailed several aspects of 105 reading assignments, e.g. the purposes for which they were set, the activities associated with them, as well as the nature of any assistance, or guidance provided by the teachers to help their students undertake the assignments effectively. It is this third point, the assistance or guidance provided, which is pertinent to our present discussion.

Design of Investigation.

The investigation was carried out by means of a questionnaire, which was presented and explained by the author to the teachers who agreed to participate in the survey. The survey was described to them as having the objective of discovering how teachers planned the use of extended reading assignments within their particular disciplines.

The disciplines were chosen to represent the Humanities, English in this case, Social Studies, which in this study is a generic term including history, geography, religious studies and, in one school, home economics. General Science was the third discipline area and had no sub-divisions since that is the title of scientific studies for the early years of secondary education. Twenty two experienced teachers from five schools participated in the study. The questions which allow us to assess the extent to which critical reading might have been developed were those in the section on comprehension instruction. These questions categorised this instruction as follows: the explanation of difficult/specialist terms, of complex of difficult language structures and of the aims of the assignment; the suggestions of helpful questions to guide students' reading and of any additional references which might also be helpful to the topic. Teachers were asked to indicate any other forms of assistance, also if no assistance was provided. In the case of 'no assistance' it was carefully explained that this category can have a positive meaning, pedagogically speaking, since it might well be very appropriate for the teacher not to give any overt, specific kind of assistance for particular reading assignments. Replies to this section of the questionnaire revealed whether or not a particular form of assistance had been provided with respect to each assignment. In many assignments more than one form of assistance was therefore recorded.

Results:

TABLE 1

DISTRIBUTION OF ASSIGNMENTS

Discipline Areas	No	Per cent
English	41	39.0
Social Studies	46	44.0
General Science	18	17.0
Total	105	100.0

These results are of interest in so far as they indicate the relative distribution of reading assignments across the three disciplines. As might be expected given the greater number of periods devoted to English and to the Social Sciences as compared with General Science, the first two areas gave rise to a much larger number of assignments than did the latter.

TABLE 2

DISTRIBUTION OF FORMS OF ASSISTANCE - ALL AREAS

Forms of Assistance	Raw Score	Per Cent
Explanation of difficult or specialist terms	52	31.5
Explanation of difficult or complex language structures	21	12.7
Explanation of assignment aims	42	25.5
Suggestion of helpful questions	21	12.7
Suggestion of additional references	5	3.0
Open forms of assistance	20	12.1
No assistance	4	2.4
Total No. of forms of assistance	165	100.0

The single most frequent bais for assistance was the 'explanation of difficult or specialist terms'. In other words teachers were anticipating problems arising with vocabulary and provided explanations to offset these problems. Explaining the aims of the assignments ranked second in terms of frequency. This form of assistance requires further investigation since the teachers were not asked to indicate precisely how they explained their aims. However, the result does indicate a consciousness of the need to indicate why a text was being assigned. In only 21 cases was there any attempt to explain 'difficult or complex language structures', but this may be because there were few such structures to explain. Readability scores for some of the texts assigned in these classes obtained for an earlier study, Farren (1982), indicated that most of the texts were within the capacity of the students' reading abilities. This would justify the infrequent need to explain language structures.

However, the low incidence of 'helpful questions', i.e. questions which would direct students' attention to important ideas in the text is a result to be noted for consideration. At this point it can be asked if the low use of such questions suggests that students are being left to read their texts without having a clear idea as to which ideas in them should be receiving most of their attention.

The low incidence of 'additional references' provided suggests that the texts used were the main, if not the sole source of information about the topics studied. For topics in the Social Sciences and General Science in particular this could indicate low use of library back-up support in disciplines where such support would appear very appropriate.

The 'other' forms of assistance listed by the teachers included discussion of illustrations, diagrams, etc.. Only one case of 'no assistance' of a formal kind was recorded.

The following tables, 3,4 and 5 indicate the break-down of these results for the three different areas of the curriculum investigated.

TABLE 3

DISTRIBUTION OF FORMS OF ASSISTANCE - ENGLISH

Forms of Assistance	Raw Score	Per Cent
Explanation of difficult or specialist terms	14	23.7
Explanation of difficult or complex language structures	6	10.2
Explanation of assignment aims	19	32.2
Suggestion of helpful questions	6	10.2
Suggestion of additional references	2	3.4
Other forms of assistance	11	18.6
No assistance	1	1.7
Total No. of Forms of Assistance	58	100.0

Explanation of assignment aims emerges as the single form of assistance most frequently offered by the English teachers surveyed. Given the content of the texts used in these classes, including as it does poetry, fiction and drama and given the fact that discussion emerged as one of the activities most frequently associated with the English assignments it is not surprising that teachers would be anxious to ensure that students had understood the overall purpose for reading their texts.

However, in the light of this concern to explain aims it is noteworthy that more specific guidance in the form of questions or directions which would encourage students to focus on a text's significant parts or ideas was not proviced. Only six incidences, or 10 per cent of the total, of such help were recorded. In other words having explained the aims of the assignments students were left to read their texts without further guidance for 90 per cent of those assignments.

The explanation of vocabulary as the second most frequent form of assistance can probably be expected to rate highly in English teaching. Questions, however, may be raised about the wisdom of merely explaining single lexical items.

TABLE 4

DISTRIBUTION OF FORMS OF ASSISTANCE - SOCIAL STUDIES

Forms of Assistance	Raw Score	Per Cent
Explanation of difficult or specialist terms	25	32.1
Explanation of difficult or complex language structures	12	16.7
Explanation of assignment aims	12	15.4
Suggestion of helpful questions	14	17.9
Suggestion of additional references	3	3.8
Other forms of assistance	8	10.3
No assistance	3	3.8
Total No. of Forms of Assistance	75	100.0

Social Studies assignments showed that the explanation of difficult or specialist terms was almost twice as frequently provided as the next highest form. Language difficulties, in fact, accounted for almost fifty per cent of the assistance provided, 48.8, if the first two items in the table are taken together. This finding is most likely a reflection of the students' first contact with the use of specialist terms in these subjects. Compared to this form of assistance, assistance by way of 'helpful questions' was very infrequently provided as was assistance with understanding the aims of the assignments. Do these findings suggest that teachers are giving an undue emphasis to language at the expense of other forms of assistance and guidance which students might need? A question that merits further investigation.

The very infrequent use of additional references is perhaps most surprising in this area of the curriculum given the wide range of supplementary texts usually available. It is a finding which suggests the dominance of the class text. However, further investigation into the precise nature of such assignment would be necessary before any definitive answer could be advanced in this respect.

TABLE 5

DISTRIBUTION OF FORMS OF ASSISTANCE - GENERAL SCIENCE

Forms of Assistance	Raw Score	Per Cent
Explanation of difficult or specialist terms	13	46.4
Explanation of complex or difficult language structures	2	7.1
Explanation of assignment aims	11	39.3
Suggestion of helpful questions	1	3.6
Suggestion of additional references	-	-
Other forms of assistance	1	3.6
No assistance	-	-
Total No. of forms of assistance	28	100.0

As for the Social Sciences explaining difficult or specialist terms was the form of assistance most frequently provided, with assignment aims a close second. This finding is probably not an unexpected feature of general science especially in first forms when a great many terms would be unfamiliar, or at least are being used in an unfamiliar context. However, the data obtained may not be representative because of the small number of assignments about which information was gathered. Together with the 'explanation of aims' and this first form of assistance over eighty-five per cent of the assistance is accounted for. No 'additional references'

at all were suggested while only one incidence of 'helpful questions' was recorded and only two of the 'explanation of complex or difficult language structures'.

If these findings have any representative validity they suggest a very narrow approach to the setting of reading assignments in General Science, an approach which emphasises clarity of aims and an understanding of lexical items.

Discussion

In view of what is known about classroom practices and in view of the obvious need to explain new and specialist vocabulary, the fact that assistance with lexical items was so frequently reported is not surprising. Indeed in the case of the students in the classes surveyed a formal assessment of their reading ability revealed vocabulary to be the most common single weakness and teachers were obviously responding to a real need in this respect. This being so, however, questions need to be raised about the form of vocabulary assistance most effective in helping students deal with new and unfamiliar terms. Merely explaining such words is unlikely, in the light of the importance of context, to be effective on its own. Indeed, this kind of teacher assistance could well be contributing to a form of dependence which obviates any need on the students' part to develop strategies for dealing with such terms which would take account of contextual cues and it could partly explain the weaknesses in handling vocabulary revealed by results of the reading tests.

The most striking result, in the author's view, is the infrequent provision of assistance for dealing with the ideas of the text which is revealed by the low incidence of 'helpful questions'. This low figure appears to support

Durkin's finding that assistance with the actual text beyond the level of linguistic explanations, which altogether account for 45 per cent of the assistance, is infrequent. This finding is even more interesting, and disturbing, in view of the fact that when asked to indicate the kinds of reading difficulties their students seemed to experience most, a very large proportion of the teachers rated the lack of study skills very highly (Farren 1982). Teachers are, therefore, expressing concern about the need for study skills but would appear either not to know how to develop them, or are simply failing to do so.

The low level of encouragement to use additional references to the class text in Social Studies suggested by the figure of 3.8 is also worrying and bears further investigation. It would appear that despite the immense improvements in library provision over recent years that there may not be as great an integration of library support into classroom work as might be expected. Likewise, the absence of any reported explanation of the aims for many of the reading assignments in this same area where one might expect such explanations, dealing as these studies do with social issues in history, geography, religious studies, etc. prompts further investigation in order to find out to what extent students understand why they are reading what is assigned.

Conclusion

While it may be some consolation to note from this study that some form of teacher assistance or guidance is provided whenever reading is assigned, the nature of this guidance poses many questions. It would not be unfair to say that it appears that many students are being left to their own devices when it comes to dealing with aspects of the texts assigned, other than vocabulary, and even with that aspect the form of assistance may be questionable. One is indeed left with the impression that students

are frequently required to read texts with the mere instruction 'read pages x to y for tomorrow and I will ask you some questions'. Why they are reading is not explained as often as it might, still less how they should read their assignments.

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